



Review processes for improving business excellence frameworks

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Abstract

Purpose – To examine the processes used by custodians of business excellence frameworks (BEFs) internationally to review and revise their frameworks, and to present the findings of a review of the design of the Australian business excellence framework (ABEF).

Design/methodology/approach – A literature review, three surveys, and a series of focus groups and key informant interviews were conducted. The study involved input from 16 countries and was part of a larger study of how BEFs are designed, reviewed, promoted and deployed within and across nations.

Findings – The role of stakeholders in business excellence model design and development, the processes involved in framework review and enhancement, and the frequency of minor and major review activities and who led them are presented. We found there was widespread support for the design of the ABEF amongst stakeholders. This review of the ABEF design and its appropriateness to the Australian business environment are discussed.

Research limitations/implications – While the primary focus was on the Australian context, the findings draw upon a range of international sources and hence are of relevance to all BEF custodians.

Practical implications – The findings from the project were used to redesign the ABEF, and are expected to help inform national business excellence strategies worldwide.

Originality/value – The paper updates the current situation regarding the review of BE frameworks in 16 countries, with a focus on Australia.

Keywords Business excellence, Business improvement, Quality management, Australia

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Business excellence frameworks (BEFs) provide a structured approach for organisations to assess their performance against a framework, and to benchmark this against an internationally recognised score. The design, review and on-going development of BEFs are the responsibility of national organisations (custodians). BEF custodians either adopt or adapt an existing BE model or develop their own unique national framework (Boys *et al.*, 2005; Tan *et al.*, 2003; Schniederjans *et al.*, 2006). Two BE models have been widely adopted in many countries, the criteria for performance excellence (CPE), used as the basis for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) in the US since 1987, and the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) excellence model since 1992.

Recent evidence has supported the economic advantages that BEFs provide. Link and Scott (2006) made a conservative estimate of the net social benefits associated with the MBNQA program, and found that the ratio of economy-wide benefits to US federal government costs in supporting the program exceeds 200:1. York and Miree (2004)



found that both MBNQA and state quality award winners generally had better financial performance than their peers before and after winning a quality award, and a study by Balasubramanian *et al.* (2005) found that the MBNQA awards generate significant shareholder value for MBNQA winners.

In this paper, one of a series disseminating the findings from a research project on the Australian business excellence framework (ABEF), we present findings on the processes used by custodians of BEFs internationally to review and revise BEFs. We examine the role of stakeholders in BE model design and development, the processes involved, and the frequency of minor and major review activities. The findings of our review of the ABEF design and its appropriateness to the Australian business environment are discussed. Our aim was to apply the best international practices to the review and redesign of the ABEF, with a key objective to examine framework development and provide recommendations leading to an improved framework and framework development process for SAI Global, the present custodian of the ABEF.

Background

The ABEF was one of the first four BEFs to be developed worldwide and was developed independently in 1987 for use within the Australian business context. The Australian quality council administered the ABEF until 2001, when custodianship passed to SAI Global. In 2005, SAI Global were the only private and for-profit organisation operating a BEF.

In 2005, the ABEF was based upon 12 core principles and 7 category groupings, containing a total of 22 separate scoring items. Additionally, an organisation's performance against each of the 22 items of the framework was assessed against 4 "dimensions", where the items were evaluated by exploring how the organisation put plans and structures into place; deploys those plans and structures; measures and analyses the outcomes; and learns from its experience. These dimensions form a cycle referred to as ADRI, comprising approach, deployment, results and improvement (SAI Global, 2004).

In 2005, SAI Global commissioned the Centre for Organisational Excellence Research at Massey University to undertake a research project with the aim of improving the design of the ABEF and helping to achieve higher levels of engagement of BE in Australia. This paper is one of a series reporting the results of the project. Other papers have summarised the research and findings in relation to: the overall project and key findings (Grigg and Mann, 2008a); practices to increase awareness of business excellence models (Grigg and Mann, 2008b); and the awards processes (Grigg and Mann, 2008c).

Business excellence framework review

Although some researchers have claimed that the original 1980s BEFs are now outdated (Williams *et al.*, 2006), BEFs have evolved significantly since the first models were developed from TQM principles and practice in the 1980s (Dale *et al.*, 2000; Lee *et al.*, 2006; Saunders and Mann, 2002). The US and European BEFs have been reviewed and revised extensively over the last ten years, moving from a focus on quality management to become integrated management models (Hermel and Ramis-Pujol, 2003; Kumar, 2007). Changes include incorporating strategic planning as a category in the CPE (Ford and Evans, 2000) and a shift to a focus on external

stakeholders, including suppliers, partners and the general public. The EFQM now has a “corporate social responsibility” category (EFQM, 2006), and the CPE now has a core value of social responsibility, which includes the need for ethical business behaviour, sustainable growth, and protection of public health, safety and the environment “beyond mere compliance” with laws and regulatory requirements (NIST, 2006).

The review and revision of BEFs is controlled by the custodian in each country. The review process varies with different custodians: variables include the frequency of changes; the review processes used; whether minor and major changes are treated separately; the extent of consultation undertaken; and which sources are consulted during the review process. Most custodians undertake minor reviews of their frameworks on a yearly basis with major reviews being conducted every two to five years. For example, the CPE are revised annually by quality experts who reach consensus on the categories and the weights assigned to each (Stading and Vokurka, 2003). Major improvement to the CPE is implemented every two years (NIST, 2006). Other examples of major reviews include the EFQM’s “Above the Clouds” project, a redesign of the EFQM’s excellence model; the 2004 review of the Japan Quality Program marking ten years since its introduction; and Mexico’s 2004/2005 review of the Mexican National Quality Award.

Custodians such as the New Zealand Business Excellence Foundation accept the annual CPE revisions from the US unaltered (Saunders and Mann, 2005). Other custodians such as Brazil, India and Mexico have adopted a BEF from an external source, such as the CPE or EFQM, but have altered the categories or weights to better reflect their national economic, cultural and organisational profiles (Chuan and Soon, 2000; Cauchick-Miguel *et al.*, 2004; Parast *et al.*, 2006; Tan *et al.*, 2003).

In Australia, a bespoke (unique) national BE model, the ABEF, was developed as one of the first BEFs, intended to reflect the Australian business environment and national culture (Prajogo and Sohal, 2004). The literature on national culture and its effect on quality management practices is extensive (for example, Kayis *et al.*, 2003; Kostova and Roth, 2002; Lagrosen, 2002; Robert *et al.*, 2000; Selivanova and Eklöf, 2001). Studies have recently suggested that the most relevant and effective BEF for a country is one that fits the prevailing national culture. In a comparative study of the U.S., Japan, Germany, Italy and England, Flynn and Saladin (2006) found that national culture plays a strong role in the effectiveness of the CPE constructs, with the exception of customer and market focus. The implication is the need for countries to develop BEFs tailored to their national cultures (Flynn and Saladin, 2006). Parast *et al.* (2006) found that “social aspects” of quality, including quality citizenship and quality responsibility, are different in the USA and Mexico, and are reflected in their BEFs. Given this cultural imperative the development of a unique Australian BEF was an understandable decision in 1987.

Whilst the design of the CPE and EFQM models have evolved through major reviews since their inception, the ABEF had no substantive review of its design for 15 years prior to our 2005 study, although the wording and weightings of its scoring items have been periodically revised. By 2005 there were a number of questions and challenges facing the Australian custodian. Australian manufacturing firms had changed their quality management practices between 1994 and 2001, investing less in training and standardising internal procedures, and more on managing supply chains, customer relationships and a high-quality working environment (Van der Wiele and

Brown, 2002; Prajogo, 2006). The profile of ABEF users was changing, with more local and state government agencies becoming clients, with different quality management issues to manufacturers, the main client base in the 1980s. Was it therefore more effective to redesign the ABEF or change to an international model? What were the views of key stakeholders? One purpose of the review of the ABEF in 2005 was to provide more information to the custodian on these issues.

Methodology

The methodology, as summarised also in Grigg and Mann (2008a-c) consisted of desk-top research (stage 1); focus groups (stage 2), and surveys and structured interviews (stage 3). Stage 1 research consisted of: a review of international published research on worldwide trends in BE, performance improvement, profitability, and long-term sustainability; and gathering information from the websites of BEF custodians. Literature was reviewed from 2000 forward and comprised: academic journal articles presenting comparative studies of excellence models; published guidelines of major award custodians for 2004/2005; and Australian context research on the drivers of excellence and improved performance.

For stage 2, six focus groups were conducted, each comprising experts with in-depth knowledge of at least one development or deployment process. The focus groups were held in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, and participants were asked for their views on framework development, design, promotion, application, and the award recognition process. In relation to each they were asked to identify strengths, opportunities, and solutions or recommendations. The focus groups were undertaken before the surveys in order to inform the survey design process and maximize the content validity of the resulting questionnaires.

Stage 3 comprised three surveys. The first was a telephone-based national “awareness survey” which indicated far lower levels of general awareness of the ABEF in Australia than had been previously reported. The results of this survey are the subject of a related paper (Grigg and Mann, 2008b).

The second survey, the “user survey” was designed to be completed by individuals who were most familiar with the design of the ABEF or SAI Global’s services used to promote its use. The survey respondents were BE evaluators or organisations that were current users of the ABEF. The purpose of this survey was to obtain in-depth feedback on how to enhance the ABEF and SAI Global’s associated BE services. Forty-six questionnaires were completed from a sampling frame consisting of 100 BE evaluators in Australia. Users rated statements on the ABEF from not important (1) to essential (5). On the basis of the rating achieved, a ranking was applied to each based on the mean response received across the five categories. The ranking revealed the perceived importance.

The third survey, the “BEF custodian survey”, was designed to identify better or best practices in terms of how BEF custodians develop and deploy BEFs. This survey was important to enable SAI Global to benchmark its key processes against other BEF custodians and obtain innovative ideas on how services could be improved. The commitment of the global excellence model (GEM) Council members to completing the survey was obtained – this helped to persuade other countries to participate. The GEM network comprises key custodians of unique BE models that cover a continent or large geographic area, including the EFQM (Europe), SAI Global (Australia), CPE (USA) and

the Japan Productivity Center for Socio-Economic Development (GEM, 2007). Follow-up telephone interviews clarified and extended the information on those practices that were rated as innovative or a better/best practice by custodians. Sixteen international custodians took part, representing Australia, Brazil, Canada, Czech Republic, Europe, India, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Scotland, Singapore, Sweden, Turkey, UK, and the USA.

Findings

There were 16 valid returns for the custodian survey, and 46 valid returns for the ABEF user survey. Analysis of the data from the two surveys revealed the processes involved in framework review and enhancement, the stakeholders involved, the frequency of reviews and who led them.

Stakeholder involvement in reviews

Custodians were asked if they undertook surveys or focus groups to obtain the opinion of key stakeholders. Nine claimed to conduct surveys and/or focus groups for this purpose. The stakeholders involved were: examiners; the instructors of examiners; self-assessors (via website); ABEF award applicants and users; CEOs and presidents of organisations; university experts; Foundation members and the Technical Council. Custodians in Ireland, England, Scotland, Czech Republic and Turkey used the EFQM model and did not conduct review surveys directly, but relied on the results of EFQM research and adopted their changes as they occurred.

The ABEF user survey asked respondents to rate the importance of consulting various stakeholders in the design and deployment of the ABEF. The stakeholder groups were: clients; evaluators; award custodian; research experts on business excellence models and their deployment; other award custodians; research experts on economic and management trends; influential associations/membership associations; government; businesses not using ABEF; and business excellence consultants.

Although ABEF users felt it was important to consult all stakeholder groups, there were five stakeholder groups that had average scores above 4 (“very important” to “essential”) for both framework design and deployment. The five highest ranked groups were: clients, evaluators, the award custodian, research experts on business excellence models and their deployment, and other award custodians.

Frequency of review

Table I shows custodians’ responses to the question of how frequently they undertook reviews of their national BE model. Almost all conducted minor reviews annually, including Japan, US, Mexico, Australia, Singapore and Sweden. Between 1992 and 1998 the EFQM updated their model annually and incrementally, but moved to a quinquennial step change leading to the 1999 model and beyond. Subsequently five yearly fundamental changes were to be made. Major reviews were annual for Japan, two-yearly for US, three-yearly for Brazil and Mexico, four-yearly for Sweden (on average), and five-yearly for Canada, Singapore and EFQM, although the EFQM review process was suspended at the time of the study. Other BEF custodians included in the study were users of either the EFQM (Turkey, UK, Ireland, India and Czech Republic) or CPE models and therefore did not undertake the reviews themselves.

Country	How frequently does your organisation update your national BE model?	Are these reviews to identify incremental or substantial changes?	If major reviews are undertaken, how frequently do they occur?
Australia	Annually	Incremental	This is the first major review in fifteen years
Brazil	Annually	Incremental	Three years
Canada	Five years	Incremental	Five years
Europe (EFQM)	The model was reviewed annually 1992-1998, changes being more at the continual improvement end of the spectrum rather than breakthrough. In 1999, an updated model was introduced after an extensive 18 months consultation process with a commitment to undertake a further fundamental review 5 years later, supported by a mid-term "refresh". The "refresh" project was conducted in mid-late 2002 and an updated model available in 2003. The more fundamental review commenced in mid-2004 but at the time of responding to this survey we have frozen our review process		
Japan	Yearly	Both	Major reviews are undertaken whenever there is a major change in the business environment
Mexico	Yearly	Mainly to identify incremental changes: including language and term simplification	Three years
New Zealand	Annually. The Baldrige CPE model is used	Same as the USA	Same as the USA
Singapore	Annually	Incremental	Five years
Sweden	Annually for the SIQ model. We also offer the Swedish Quality Award for applications based the EFQM and Baldrige models	Both	Depends; on average every four years
United States	The criteria for each sector (business, education, and health care) are updated annually. In addition each process or event undergoes an evaluation after completion to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement	Both incremental and substantial changes. For the most part, revisions are on a two-year improvement cycle with major revisions in the odd years (e.g. 2005) and minor revisions in the even years (e.g. 2006)	Substantial changes to the criteria occur every other year. Major changes to the Award process are implemented as needed and must be approved by BNQP's Board of Overseers

Table I.
Frequency of reviews
of BE models

At the first Melbourne workshop, ABEF users and evaluators recommended that framework changes should be implemented at two-yearly intervals as a minimum period (while 3-5 years was considered appropriate by some of the focus group members), and that forthcoming changes to the framework be indicated in advance. Over 90 per cent of ABEF users and evaluators felt that annual reviews resulting in even minor changes was overly frequent, and that less frequent changes would be sufficient if fully justified and explained. A major reason cited for this was the confusion and lack of consistency that annual changes introduced. For the ABEF user survey question, “*how frequently do you think changes to the ABEF should be made*”, the modal response (43 per cent of respondents) was every two years, with another 26 per cent supporting triennial minor review. For the question “*how frequently should major reviews of the ABEF be undertaken*”, the modal response (48 per cent of the sample) felt that this should be every five years. A combined 87 per cent of the sample felt that it should be every five years or less.

Framework review processes

Internationally, BEF custodians were asked to outline their normal process for framework review. Examples are shown in Table II. Until the review conducted for this study the ABEF was incrementally reviewed on an annual basis, usually leading to

Country	Process for BE model review
Canada	Identify the need for revisions; form a team of volunteers to start the process off with suggested changes; involve people all over the country in reviewing/suggesting the changes; revise based on input; test with a few volunteer organisations; publish
Europe (EFQM)	The most recent fundamental review started with an exploratory phase which identified a number of alternatives. Then a design phase for the fundamental concepts and the model. At this step we engaged key stakeholders in a core team, supported by other key stakeholders contributing via a virtual community of practice. One critical dimension in this process is the update of all related services (case studies, internet tools, etc.) in more than ten languages
Japan	At the end of each award cycle chairpersons of the committees on assessment criteria, recognition system, and examination meet with the Secretary General to discuss possible areas of modification. Then the Assessment Criteria Committee through its working group of practitioners and consultants does the actual modification of the model. The modified model is then presented to the Japan Quality Award Committee for final approval
Singapore	Solicit inputs for changes from practitioners and industry; review changes made by other global partners, e.g. MBNQA, EFQM; propose relevant changes to our criteria; discussions with focus group of senior assessors to fine-tune changes; submit proposal to Management Committee and Governing Council for endorsement; communicate changes to all parties
United States	Continuous review of literature for all sectors of the economy. Input is received from: the Board of Examiners, the Board of Overseers, Award applicants, and external experts, Examiners during Examiner training, and via an online “Call for Comments” and an annual Improvement Day. After reviewing the input, the staff of the Baldrige office develop a draft, which is distributed to several external experts, including the Panel of Judges, for review and additional input. This input is then reviewed by staff and the final product is developed and distributed

Table II.
Examples of the
processes custodians
used for BE model review

small changes in the framework. These reviews had been led by a Framework Steering Committee that consisted of experienced evaluators and client organisations. The recommendations were then considered and approved by the SAI Global General Manager.

Across the international custodians a wide range of individuals or groups led the review process, including: the Vice-President of the custodian body; the Award Office; the Director of the BE Program; professors; researchers; consultants; custodian representative and government representative; steering committee; project manager; business leaders; and functional experts.

Custodians were asked to outline the nature and extent of the research they normally undertake to determine whether to make changes to the model, for example, to the categories, items and/or weightings. Examples are shown in Table III. Sources of data mentioned by respondents include: current users, marketplace trends, continuous review of literature, benchmarking against other models, surveys of evaluators and award applicants, updates on changes made by other custodians.

Custodians were asked how, in their opinion, the review process could be improved. Suggestions included: a process to test customers' reactions to proposed changes; electronic input capabilities; research in universities undertaken to support the review process; feedback from the GEM Committee; and greater feedback from stakeholders such as business leaders and functional experts, clients (e.g. framework purchasers, consulting and training users), business leaders, functional experts and academia. The results are summarised in Table IV.

Review of ABEF design

The data from focus groups, survey and structured interviews indicated that users thought that the ABEF was sound and rigorous in its design, but the design could be simplified. General confidence of users in the ABEF design was high. Asked if the ABEF was based on sound principles and gave a reasonable assessment of Business Excellence, 78 per cent of respondents to the user survey were "extremely confident" or "very confident". Users specifically reported it to be an intuitive, integrated, and balanced framework with clear links between different business drivers, and

Country	Research undertaken
Australia	Surveys of evaluators and Award applicants at the end of each award cycle
Brazil	Research fundamentals (every three years), requirements (every two years)
Canada	Research on current users and current trends in the marketplace
Europe (EFQM)	Recent review: a comparison of the existing EFQM fundamental concepts with the concepts/values/principles promoted by other GEM members in their BE models. Also conducted CEO interviews (50 +) and a global study on the future of work, "Above the Clouds". These three main strands were supported by a review of existing research
Mexico	Benchmark with other models, mainly the EFQM and CPE. Consider the opinion of senior evaluators, and research on trends in the field
Japan	Conduct opinion surveys of examiners and self-assessors
Singapore	Update on changes made by other leading global award custodians

Note: GEM, Global Excellence Model Council

Table III.
Examples of research undertaken to assist decisions about changes to BE models

Table IV.
Suggestions for
improving BEF review
processes

Country	How, in your opinion, could your review process be improved?
Australia	Greater client feedback (e.g. framework purchasers, consulting and training users), rather feedback just from evaluators and award applicants. Review could be more effectively co-ordinated with our GEM partners
Brazil	In the last two years we implemented a structured process for review the BE, including an academic process
Europe (EFQM)	In theory a yearly update, but this is difficult to give the lead times between finalising the English language version and other language versions. A question for us is "Why should such a model exist? Is it a set of criteria to support an award or a systemic view of what the drivers are of competitiveness for organisations?" Another question is whether we can have one model for all?
Japan	Incorporate in the review process a kind of test process to test the reaction of the customer to the proposed modification by selecting at random persons involved in the corporate improvement programs and listen to their opinions
Mexico	Promoting research on the field in the leading Mexican Universities; a stronger involvement of our stakeholders in the process; and receive feedback from members of GEM Committee
Singapore	Intensify process to solicit inputs from business leaders, functional experts and academia
Sweden	More involvement of users research and systematic exchange of experiences with other award organizers
United States	Obtaining additional input for the annual Improvement Day and increasing electronic input, e.g. by conducting the Improvement Day sessions online

appreciated its flexibility for use in all types of organizations; large, small, for-profit, and not-for-profit organizations.

Two opportunities for improvement in ABEF design were identified: these related to the complexity of its design, and the language used. 56.5 per cent of users thought the ABEF design was "a little too complex" while 39 per cent thought it was "about right". 39 per cent of users thought the language used to describe the ABEF was "a little too academic", while 50 per cent thought it was "about right". We recommended minor revisions in the design to reduce complexity, and simplification of the language used in the ABEF and its guidance literature. The ABEF design findings and recommended changes are now outlined.

Principles

About 12 ABEF principles were stated to be the foundation of the ABEF model and were derived from business excellence research (SAI Global, 2004). In the users survey, 68 per cent indicated that the principles were either "very useful" or "essential" for assessment purposes. A majority of users (71.7 per cent or 33 of the 46 respondents) indicated that 12 principles were too many, and 69.6 per cent of users considered it "essential" or "very important" that the principles should be easy to remember.

We noted that the principles were considered to be valid in their purpose and usefulness, and should remain as a component of the ABEF. We recommended a reduction from twelve principles to eight. Our other recommendations for principles included: ensure that the principles are embodied in and linked to the categories and items; include ethics, agility (innovation and creativity) and partnerships within the principle statements; and make the language and wording of the principles more

consistent. Table V shows the eight revised principles that were adopted post-review by SAI Global.

Categories

At the time of the study, the seven ABEF categories were: leadership; strategy and planning; data, information and knowledge; people; customer and market focus; innovation, quality and improvement; and success and sustainability. Unlike most other BEFs, the “results” and “enabler” criteria were not explicitly separated. Instead, each main criterion contained items that relate to enabler activities and results. Strong support was shown for the categories to be retained with only minor changes. In the ABEF users survey data, 87 per cent of respondents considered the number of categories to be “about right”. 80.4 per cent (37 of 46) said that they knew all seven categories from memory, and 11 per cent knew “most of them”, indicating a high level of familiarity. The perceived effectiveness of the individual categories ranged from 89 to 98 per cent “mostly effective” or “completely effective” across the seven categories. When asked for their recommendations for each category, 80-93 per cent of respondents indicated “leave it as it is” for six of the seven categories, while for the “innovation, quality and improvement” category, 67 per cent of respondents indicated “leave it as it is” and 26 per cent indicated “re-word”.

The combined data from focus groups, survey and structured interviews led us to the following recommendations: that the categories remain within the model; the number of categories remain at seven; the category numbers should be re-ordered to comply with the ABEF diagrammatical design; the category names are communicated effectively via the ABEF and so the current system of communicating the category names via the ABEF guidebooks should be retained; and category 6 should be renamed to include process management. Following our review SAI Global retained the seven categories and category 6 was renamed process management, improvement and innovation.

Items

Users indicated strong support for the twenty-two items to be retained with only minor changes. About 19 of the items were perceived as “completely effective” or “mostly

ABEF principles	
1	Lead by example, provide clear direction, build organizational alignment and focus on sustainable achievement of goals
2	Understand what markets and customers value, now and into the future, and use this to drive organizational design, strategy, products and services
3	Continuously improve the system
4	Develop and value people’s capability and release their skills, resourcefulness and creativity to change and improve the organization
5	Develop agility, adaptability and responsiveness based on a culture of continual improvement, innovation and learning
6	Improve performance through the use of data, information and knowledge to understand variability and to improve strategic and operational decision making
7	Behave in an ethically, socially and environmentally responsible manner
8	Focus on sustainable results, value and outcomes

Table V.
The revised ABEF
principles post-review

effective” by 83-98 per cent of respondents. The lowest scoring item for effectiveness was “Environmental and community contribution” where 72 per cent perceived it as “completely effective” or “mostly effective”, and 21 per cent as “partially effective”.

Our recommendations included: that the items should remain within the model, and that the number of items is about right; four items should be reviewed and/or reworded; the item names were communicated effectively via the ABEF guidebook and so the system of communicating the items via the ABEF guidebooks should be retained.

Scoring system

In the ABEF an organisation’s performance against each of the 22 items was assessed against four “dimensions”, referred to as ADRI. Although 65 per cent of respondents in the user survey wanted the ADRI Cycle to “stay as it is”, we suggested the ADRI scoring system could be improved. In terms of specific criteria the following were recommended: the strategy and planning category points to stay the same or reduce by a maximum of 10 points; the knowledge and information category points to be reduced by between 10 and 20 points; customer and market focus category points to increase by up to 50 points. We recommended no changes to the scores for the categories: leadership; people; innovation, quality and improvement; and success and sustainability.

Discussion

The rigor and frequency of the BEF review and improvement process varied from custodian to custodian. All the custodians either conducted an annual review of their BEF, or had adopted the annual revisions of the EFQM or CPE that were conducted by the originating custodians. These annual reviews typically led to minor incremental changes. Custodians’ annual process of reviewing BEFs did not vary substantively between nations (Table II). Typically an information gathering or research phase was undertaken (Table III), a range of stakeholders were consulted and identified the need for changes, and a formally constituted team or committee considered the input. A draft was distributed to external experts or volunteer organisations, and the feedback resulted in further revision by the custodian before final publication.

While all custodians effected annual minor reviews, there was considerable variation in the frequency of major reviews of national BEFs (Table I). Frequency ranged from, for example, two years for the CPE, up to 15 years for the ABEF, which was undergoing its first major review since it was designed in 1987. Custodians that did not conduct regular major reviews commented that substantive changes were implemented “as needed”, and were undertaken whenever there was “a major change in the business environment”. If regular major reviews are not scheduled it raises questions as to how these custodians monitor and evaluate the business, economic and academic environments for potential impacts on the validity of their BEF design.

For custodians such as SAI Global decisions around the frequency of the BE review process have multiple ramifications. The process has to be resourced and the subsequent changes in documentation funded. Evaluators need to be re-trained so that they understand the changes to the framework. Clients need to be re-trained, and substantial costs may be incurred by clients in producing new internal publications and documentation to reflect the changes. Benchmark comparisons of historical scores

against BEFs are difficult to do on an item by item basis if the items change regularly, reducing the opportunity for client organisations to validly measure their improvement over time.

The view of the majority of ABEF clients regarding the frequency of review was that minor changes to the ABEF are made every two years, and that a major review takes place once every five years, with changes implemented in the sixth year. Such changes are in keeping with global trends and practices.

The user survey findings indicated that, for ABEF design, the scope of consultation should include clients, evaluators, custodians, research experts on BE as a minimum and for framework deployment, the scope of consultation should include clients, evaluators, custodians, research experts on BE as a minimum. Because of the challenges faced in increasing the level of awareness and use of the ABEF we strongly recommended to SAI Global that all key stakeholders be involved as this would increase buy-in to the ABEF. Therefore, especially for deployment of the framework, government and influential associations should be closely involved.

There was widespread support for the design of the ABEF. There was support for: the ABEF's principles, as "broad theoretical drivers for improvement that assist in encouraging appropriate behaviours, values and fundamental truths"; for its items as a valid basis for scoring; for the ADRI dimensions; and for its non-prescriptive approach. However, 60 per cent of users believed that the design was a little too complex, 40 per cent believing the language was "too academic". Surprisingly, based on the support for the ABEF, 61 per cent of users reported that a switch to an international BE model (such as the CPE) should at least be considered if the cost to administer such a model was significantly reduced for SAI Global and the advantages of other international models can be obtained, for example, tailored BEF guides for specific industry sectors. The finding is at variance with some of the findings from other Australasian-based research (Hubbard *et al.*, 2002), which indicates that certain principles and practices that are successful in US organizations do not translate well to the Australasian context – an example being the application of "stretch targets".

Concluding remarks

A number of specific recommendations were made to SAI Global on the basis of our research. Assuming that redesigning the ABEF was preferable to adopting an international model (and SAI Global did subsequently decide to retain the ABEF) our recommendations around the design of the ABEF were, first, a review mechanism. We suggested a framework design steering team meet annually to discuss potential changes to the design of the framework and the framework recognition process (the awards process). The framework design steering team's scope of consultation should include clients, evaluators, custodians, research experts on BE as a minimum and preferably the steering team itself will consist of representatives from these areas.

Second, we recommended minor changes are made to the framework design every two years, and a major review of framework development and deployment be undertaken every fifth year with changes in framework design to be implemented in the sixth year. Third, a consultative committee should be created, chaired by the General Manager of SAI Global, to assist both the development and deployment of the ABEF. The framework design steering team to report to this committee. The committee's scope of consultation should include clients, evaluators, custodians,

research experts on BE, other BEF custodians; research experts on economic and management trends; influential associations; government; businesses not using ABEF and business excellence consultants and preferably the committee itself would consist of representatives from these areas.

Two important suggestions were made by custodians to improve BEF review and development processes. The first was engaging academia and promoting BE research in leading universities. BEF design needs to be supported by more research particularly in terms of category and item score allocation. The second improvement suggestion was the systematic exchange of experiences and greater sharing of management research information between BEF custodians. This could be achieved through a mechanism such as a central repository administered by the GEM Council, whose members could give feedback to custodians who are reviewing their national BEF.

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Further reading

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